Book review of 'Learner-centred education in international perspective. Whose pedagogy for whose development?'

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BOOK REVIEW

Schweisfurth, M. (2013) Learner-centred education in international perspective. Whose pedagogy for whose development? London: Routledge.

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Catherine Bovill's research interests focus on student-staff co-creation of curricula, curriculum conceptualisations, peer observation of teaching and the internationalisation of higher education. She supports and advises a wide range of academic development work in all disciplines across the University of Glasgow. Recent external work includes co-leading a UK Higher Education Academy Change Programme, 'students as partners in curriculum design'.

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Learner-centred education (LCE), or student-centred learning as it is often referred to in the higher education context, is a pedagogical approach that emphasises the following: active learning; increased responsibility of the learner for the content of their learning, and also for how they learn; and greater collaboration/interdependence between the teacher and students (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). In this book, the author explores the concept of LCE and its potential as a pedagogical approach in a range of different international contexts. Although, the main focus of the book is on the implementation of LCE in school settings, the informative discussion of both the theoretical and practical implementation of LCE, and the well considered insights into implementing learning and teaching in different international contexts, offer many relevant insights for academic developers working in universities and colleges.

Part 1 of the book introduces us to LCE as a global phenomenon that is often advocated as the pedagogy of choice in national and local school education policies around the world. The author provides us with a conceptualization of LCE through the use of a number of continua, such as authoritarian – democratic; extrinsic motivation – intrinsic motivation; fixed knowledge – fluid knowledge; fixed curriculum – negotiated content; and authoritative teachers – facilitators of learning. These continua are used along with a critique of the literature to come to a helpful definition of LCE as a 'pedagogical approach which gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the content and process of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners' needs, capacities and interests' (p.20).

We are then introduced to three 'justificatory narratives' that are frequently used to underpin arguments for pursuing LCE. These are 1) the cognitive perspective – the idea that students 'learn more effectively when they have more control over their learning', 2) the emancipatory perspective – which suggests that LCE can 'free people from oppressive forms of control…manifested in knowledge which limits their thinking and prospects and pedagogical approaches that keep them subjugated to the wills of those in

power', and 3) the preparation perspective – suggesting that LCE is 'an appropriate preparation for contemporary and future life' (p.21). After providing a discussion of different global, national and local contexts, the author develops the justificatory narratives helpfully throughout the rest of the text to aid interpretations of real examples of LCE from around the world.

Part 2 of the text opens with a chapter that highlights the difficulties of implementing LCE policies around the world due to a set of challenges arising from what are often resource-poor or politically turbulent settings. The next four chapters use research and real examples from The Gambia, China, Russia and South Africa to demonstrate some of the shared, as well as unique, challenges of implementing LCE in these vastly different contexts. Although, the final chapter of Part 2 also offers an example of implementation of LCE, this chapter is qualitatively different from previous chapters in that it focuses on how mobile international students coming to study in higher education settings (mainly in 'developed countries'), successfully adjust to LCE curricula and pedagogies. The author reports that,

> ...about six weeks into their new programmes in the UK, international undergraduate students were asked what they worried about before their arrival in the UK, and what concerned them in the early weeks of their studies. Across a very wide range of lifestyle and study concerns, the greatest differences between expectation and experience, and substantial worries for students, were classroom methods that were unfamiliar to them: speaking up and answering questions in whole-group discussions, and working in small groups…these were not a product of language concerns (about which they were more worried before departure than after arrival) but of adjustments to a learning environment that was more active and dialogic, and pedagogical relationships which followed rules to which they were not accustomed (p.118).

Many staff will be familiar with the experiences of international students that the author reports in relation to assessment, where she found 'their personal highs and lows are very closely synchronized with their success or failure on assessment tasks' (p.119). However, in summary, the author provides evidence of positive outcomes for international students adjusting to LCE,

> border-crossing students find new pedagogies their greatest challenge. They change their study habits and to some extent their behaviours in a learning group. They have positive views of the ‘strange’ learner-centred approaches, despite the difficulties of transition. Their actual learning styles change measurably (p119).

and 'years later in interview some still attribute the changes in part to their experiences of learner-centred pedagogies and the independent and co-operative learning opportunities and critical thinking they came to appreciate' (p.120).

Interestingly some of this apparent success in higher education students adjusting to LCE is attributed by the author to adult education principles and practices being more consistent with the emancipatory purpose of LCE, than is perhaps the case for schools. Certainly higher education has adult students, but I would argue that in many ways, higher education shares a similar obsession with assessment *of* learning that is seen as a limiting factor in implementing LCE in schools. Universities, arguably, are still only tentatively moving towards assessment *for* learning. Indeed, the market-driven, achievement-focused higher education sector of the 21st century may sadly have more in common with the drivers and challenges of schools education than it does with the emancipatory motivations of adult education.

The penultimate chapter of the book draws together a set of ten lessons from theory, evidence and the international examples presented. Finally, the author concludes with minimal standards for LCE as well as a call for contextualised approaches to LCE that map 'flexibly onto longstanding pedagogical traditions and deeply held cultural beliefs rather than fighting them…[with]…respect for local culture as a fundamental part of the process of change…[and]…the hope of building on, and potentially strengthening, the existing pedagogical constellation' (p.154).

This book is an ambitious overview of the theory, justifications and implementation challenges of LCE across different global settings. Its scope is vast in terms of providing a sense of the global, national and local interpretations and challenges of LCE in schools (and to a lesser degree in higher education). With an

understandable caveat that it cannot possibly capture what takes place everywhere, it is an eminently readable, coherent and well-considered account of LCE in global contexts.

Different chapters of this book will be informative for academic developers supporting academic staff to implement student-centred learning in their home institutions and international settings, and to meet the needs of their international students. The book also offers relevant research and examples useful for academic developers running introductory courses for new academic staff who have come from different international settings, where academic developers are attempting to model student-centred learning in their academic development provision (see for example Swennen, Lunenberg, & Korthagen, 2008 for a discussion of the importance of teachers practicing what they preach).

Academic developers will know some academic staff who continue to resist using LCE, despite being based in countries with a reputation for promoting LCE. We are all aware of particular lecturers or professors who continue to 'go their own way'. This suggests that some of the resistance to LCE around the world is not simply due to perceived differences between LCE 'cultures' and national cultures but as the author notes, much resistance is down to individual staff attitudes, background, training and opportunities (see also Jordan et al., 2014 on this subject). The author concludes with a reminder to readers that students generally learn best when the learning engenders

> high levels of learner engagement and motivation, building on learners' existing understandings to construct patterns of meaning, use of dialogue and setting appropriate levels of challenge. None of these most basic principles is culture-specific, as long as the emphasis is not exclusively on the individual learner (p.143).

References

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